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Ludic literacies at the intersections of cultures: An interview with James Paul Gee

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For almost twenty years James Paul Gee has had considerable influence in the development of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), a body of work that presents a unique and exciting interpretation of what it means to interact with texts. The central argument of the NLS is that interaction with text is necessarily a socially mediated process, and that literacy practices cannot be isolated as a set of skills to be transmitted and measured. This work challenges psychological interpretations of the act of reading or writing, and places sign interpretation and production at the intersection of cognitive, social and cultural processes.

Gee was born in San Jose, California, and was educated in California, attaining his M.A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics at Stanford. He studied for some time at the Mac Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Holland, and moved towards a more sociolinguistic approach to language. This led to the development of the ideas published in *Sociolinguistics and Literacies* (1990), a founding document in the formation of the NLS. His book *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (1999) brings together his work on a methodology for studying communication in its cultural settings, an approach that has been widely received over the last two decades. In these works, along with publications on the new work order and the role of education within it, Gee has analyzed the political and social implications of the new literacy studies.

Gee's most recent books both deal with video games, language, and learning. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003) argues that good video games are designed to enhance learning through effective learning principles supported by research in the Learning Sciences. *Situated Language and Learning* (2004) places video games within an overall theory of learning and literacy and shows how they can help us in thinking about the reform of schools. Gee is one of the few academics to have a website dedicated to inventing an avatar (a web-based alternative persona) for him.

In this interview, Gee talks about some of his influences, the ideas that have driven his work and his expectations for the future. In the interview the reader gets the sense of a complex and committed thinker working at the intersection of cultures, but more than this, working at the intersection of *types* of cultures. Gee is thinking about what happens when textual interaction as represented by a virtual world rubs up against a non-virtual world, and how the tools we use to understand literacy practices in traditional forms of text can be applied to that cross-fertilization.

There are lessons to be learned from Gee's thoughts for all of us working to understand the effects of virtual representation, but also for people interested in continuing to deepen and broaden the NLS perspective to incorporate more aspects of language use. The multilingual world we inhabit increasingly brings forward the types of questions that fascinate Gee: changes of identity, the importance of sociocultural work, the centrality of play, and so on. His interests are becoming more important to all of us in the field of language and intercultural communication.

**LAIC:** As student of both philosophy and theoretical linguistics how have you come to focus your work on the application of theory to discourse and literacy practice?

**JPG:** I started my career working on issues at the intersection of philosophy and syntactic and semantic theory, working entirely within the perspective of generative grammar. At my first teaching job (at Hampshire College in Amherst), we had trouble recruiting students to take our classes in theoretical linguistics. Lots of the students there were interested in the humanities, especially literature, so I decided to teach a course on stylistics (linguistics and literature) to whet their appetites for more linguistics—though at the time I knew nothing about stylistics. The ploy rather worked in the other direction and I got interested in meaning beyond logical form. Thinking about meaning more generally gradually led me from a rather structural approach to linguistics and literature to a concern for discourse much more generally and from there to a concern for how meaning is made in social and cultural contexts. As my interest began to change I took a job in applied linguistics at Boston University and the program at that time happened to be in a School of

Education. I had no training in education and knew nothing about it, but the issues buzzing around me seemed just great ones for an expanded notion of what linguistics could contribute to the world. I started my work in linguistics and education there, working on the question of why young African-American children brought rich verbal and narrative skills (recognizable to any sociolinguist familiar, for example, with work on oral storytelling across the world) to school only to fail at “sharing time” (“show-and-tell”, story telling time) and have teachers say there was some problem with their language skills. My colleague Sarah Michaels had brought this data to my attention. It led to my first book and also gradually got me interested in the connections among oral language, literacy, schooling, and society.

**LAIC:** Who would you say had a major influence on your work, intellectual and otherwise?

**JPG:** Of course, Chomsky was a major influence and I have never fully outgrown that influence. Even when I was an undergraduate, Wittgenstein was a major influence on my thinking and he has been ever since. I still think the *Investigations* is a foundational masterpiece for what we do. My early advisor and teacher at Stanford, Elisabeth Cross Traugott, was a major influence—as I began my career change I realized that she had given me most of the “capital” I used to make that change. After that I have been influenced by lots and lots of people—in fact, one of the foundations of my work is an attempt to integrate a broad collection of work from different fields and written in different academic languages. I think of my theoretical work as trying to fit Bourdieu, Bakhtin, Latour, Hacking, and Foucault together with a particular perspective on language inspired by Wittgenstein, Halliday, Hymes, Gumperz, and Labov (but still with a tinge of influence from Chomsky). Odd stuff I know and, by and large, it’s better not to know what’s in the soup.

**LAIC:** You argue in your work for a grounded, situated view of discourse with emancipatory potential. How do you see this working in contexts where the discourse is not shared and the languages in social play are multiple?

**JPG:** I am interested in language within Discourses (with a capital “D”). Discourses are ways of speaking/listening, writing/reading, acting, interacting, valuing, thinking, and using objects, tools, technologies, places and times, to recognize and get recognized as having specific (often contested and negotiated) socially situated identities. These identities are formed in historical, lived experience, and reflect both who we are and what we do. They are as disparate as being/doing a specific type of first-grader in Ms. Smith’s classroom, a Latino gang member in Los Angeles, a member of the legal bar in Madison, a Chomskian linguist, a Christian fundamentalist, or a Hindu nationalist in New Delhi. The list is endless and endlessly changing. All Discourses are defined in large part by their relationships for and against other Discourses, such as being/doing a person with multiple personality disorder today, as against the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or a midwife today in Spain as against 18<sup>th</sup> century Maine. All of them can lock people into narrow and policed perspectives on the world, however powerful these perspectives may otherwise be. For me a “liberating Discourse” is formed when we have to juxtapose two different Discourses and “rise above them” to understand them in a larger frame (in the frame of Discourses working across time and space). This requires the development of a meta-language and ways of meta-thinking about Discourses, identities, and the workings of status, solidarity, and difference in society and the world. It is possible to imagine people forming identities (new Discourses) committed to this very task and world view and having as much allegiance to that Discourse as they do to their other more narrowly defined Discourses. Now, I must say that such “liberation” is not guaranteed to issue in our own favored personal political values, but I firmly believe that such a view of Discourses at work is the best stance from which to make convincing arguments about social justice that aren’t just a plea to make the world over again in the colors of our favored Discourses (e.g., as a “liberal social scientist” or “neo-liberal economist”).

**LAIC:** In the social practices model there is a great deal of emphasis upon literacy events within what could be loosely considered as communities of literacy practice. How would we begin to think about bounding such a CoP? What kinds of events can you envisage coming into play as people move between literacy communities?

**JPG:** I don't much like the term "community of practice"—because of the baggage the word "community" carries—but, of course, I like the work. I have sought to deal with the same sorts of themes through the notion of Discourses and more recently the idea of "affinity groups" or "affinity spaces". Some of my recent work has been devoted to digital literacies, video games, and people affiliating around video games and other popular culture practices (e.g., anime or *Yu-Gi-Oh* [an online trading card game]). The play with real and virtual identities, the many different routes to participation and status, the recruitment of diverse skill sets, the ways in which "ordinary" people can be producers and not just consumers, and the porousness and flexibility of "membership" that these new digital (and often partly virtual, partly real) spaces allow holds out, for me, real promise of new practices for equity and a sense of belonging and agency for people. Of course, there are lots of dangers and lots and lots of bad practices here, but there are some rays of hope as well that I would not want crushed by academic pessimism (and I admit to be a pessimist). In the U.S. today we have a profoundly segregated society—segregated by race, but most deeply by class as people live and deal, more and more, only their own "kind". The public sphere is dying—the place where people come together and are forced to deal with "the public", the full range of difference in their society. *World of Warcraft*—a massively popular multi-player game—is closer to being a true public sphere than are many of our cities today.

I imagine society as working this way: there are a myriad of Discourses. Each person moves in and out of many of them each day, week, month, year, and across a lifetime. Imagine that each time I am acting within a given Discourse, or combination of them, that a specific color of paint is put on me, each Discourse being associated with a different color. If we look at a person, the predominant color scheme on the person now defines that person's social trajectory thus far. We live in a world in which people who are not, fairly early in life, wearing a coat of many colors are a potential danger to themselves and to others. We want to design activities wherein people get coats of many colors—not the same ones either—and not necessarily a coat of a currently politically correct color scheme.

**LAIC:** What can we learn from examining the textual production and consumption with the contexts of notions such as 'global literacy' and those you outline in your recent work on globalization around 'New Times, New Literacies' ?

**JPG:** I don't know what "global literacy" means. For me each us primarily acts locally in the sense that what we say and do enacts a socially specific identity and activity (or range of them) that makes sense in a specific place and at a specific time. However, since words and actions like ours have ever been circulating through time and space, what we say and do—as Bakhtin makes clear—comes in part to instantiate a non-local historical identity. This has always been true (in fact, the Old Testament operates by a theory that one way to view your current local actions is to see them as a reenactment of the ancestors' words and actions, thereby giving them historicized, non-local meaning—of course, for this to work a group needs stories of the ancestors to circulate). But in today's global, media-saturated, and digital world, it is much easier for our words and deeds to contribute to larger national, regional, and global issues, to be captured by them, and to be contested by others. All of a sudden, every word and deed of an Islamic person takes on a multitude of larger resonances that threaten to swamp the local, the peculiar, and the specific. It is as if we are all aware of everybody's ancestors and the "deep" meanings they can give to everyday action (and, of course, today, many of the "ancestors" aren't dead that long or dead at all, thanks to the power of media and celebrity to create "ancestors").

**LAIC:** If, as you have argued many times, different sets of literacy events have differential power relations within and between them, can we say anything about how this might affect the possibility of moving between literacy CoPs?

**JPG:** Discourses define themselves with and against other Discourses; for example, when I was a Chomskian linguist that Discourse contracted certain relations of alignment with the Discourse of physics and against Discourses in the social sciences and humanities. This had to do not just with ideas, but with values, attitudes, and ways of acting and interacting. It had effects on institutional

politics within and outside linguistics departments, as well, different in different places. Of course, the same sort of thing can be said about various religious and caste groups in India, for example. Power, for me, is about the control of “social goods” (that is, anything that people in a society consider a value, so things that bring people status, respect, control, agency, and so forth). To return to my example of African American children telling stories at sharing time in school—these children brought a language practice from their home and community Discourses to school, but the school-based Discourse refused to cede it respect and status. In turn, the school-based Discourse gave respect and status to sharing time turns that were “reports” and not really stories (because sharing time was early training for literacy, training in what the teacher thought of as explicit, linear, decontextualized language). So this really hurts the child’s transition into school-based language and literacy practices. This is an old example, but typical of how things have worked for a long while.

But there are possibilities for change. Community-based (e.g., rap) and popular-based (e.g., fan fiction writing) language and literacy practices, done out of school, are beginning to create their own standards and social goods. Some young people see them as better than what is on offer in school and schools are beginning (just beginning) to have to worry about the fact, for instance, that seven-year-olds see more complex “academic” language on a *Yu-Gi-Oh* card than they do in school. This change is connected to two interesting facts about popular culture these days: first, it is very cognitively and linguistically complex and, second, kids can use modern technologies to produce and not just consume—they can come to think like designers and have their own opinions about quality. None of this removes the dominance of so-called mainstream institutions, but it puts pressure on them and opens up new possibilities (and, of course, new perils, as well). We should note too that these popular culture practices—e.g., rap, anime, fan fiction—are global and carried out in groups (often on the Internet) that are often quite diverse in language and ethnic backgrounds (witness anime as a world-wide phenomenon uniting kids across many boundaries). This is interculturality with a vengeance—and the kids are way ahead of the adults.

**LAIC:** Do you see the way forward for the New Literacy Studies being model building, detailed investigation of particular relationships, both, or something else entirely?

**JPG:** The New Literacy Studies is simply the idea that literacy must be studied in its full range of contexts: cognitive, interactive, cultural, historical, and institutional. Literacy is always part of a specific practice and that practice always involves lots more than just literacy or even than just language. In this sense the NLS is descriptive and “ethnographic”. Since literacy is so married in today’s world with digital technologies, the boundaries between “literacy” and “technology” as areas of study, especially in education, are coming down—as they are between “literacy” and “content” (e.g., science, literature, math), since content is always carried by language (or some other symbol system) and shapes distinctive language and literacy practices. One thing I would like to see spread is what I call, for want of a better term, “interventional ethnographies”. In an interventional ethnography you don’t just describe what people do, you resource them in some way—give them new or expanded tools—and see what they do and how they do it. So I mentioned a couple of times in this interview that I am impressed by how kids today can so readily produce their own media (anime, video, fan fiction, web sites, blogs, video game modifications, and so forth). So what happens when we spread this capacity or expand it for kids who are being shut out? Can we resource whole social groups in ways that facilitate their agendas or help them gain equity and access. Can we create new cross-cultural links? Of course, as always, there are perils among the possibilities, but, nonetheless, the NLS has a heritage of activism and intervention and that needs to continue. Interventional ethnographies could lead to model building in the sense of building models of how to improve social relations, cross-cultural understanding, and institutions and how to reinvigorate the public sphere.

**LAIC:** One pragmatic application of theories around intercultural literacy is the educational process of adults who are learning new literacies. The social practices model often proves to be an extremely complex underpinning for a pedagogical approach. Have you any thoughts on how we can take this model, which steadfastly refutes reduction to skills, and make it work in the classroom?

**JPG:** The problem—as you hint—is not skills but reduction to skills. In any practice, there are skills, as well as “facts” (information), that people need to acquire in order to participate, but the question is how you best learn the skills and facts. Do you start with the skills and facts—foreground them—or start some other place? To me the most effective form of learning is to start with clear goals (that the learners share), then give the learners tools (literacies, technologies, tools, social practices) to help them reach these goals. As they use these tools, they must use—and eventually acquire—skills and facts, but the skills and facts are recruited to carry out meaningful functions to reach clear goals. So imagine someone learning about urban planning. Urban planning involves a bunch of legal codes. You don’t start with the codes, you start with the plans and repeatedly use the codes to carry out your goals. It really helps to give the learner a piece of technology—even a spread sheet, better yet a visual representation—that mediates between the codes and the overall plan. But here, for me, is the deep problem: we hand people language (oral or written) that is about a “game” (a practice, a set of roles and responsibilities to do certain things in the world) but we divorce the learning of this language (e.g., the language of urban planning, mathematics, or English as a second language for meaningful integration into a society) from the games. We seek “competence” before “performance”, but the best way to learn is to play the game with other players who are better than you, but intent on getting you to join them. Performance before competence is a better approach. However, in regard to learning languages or literacy people hold cultural models of learning (models they usually got from school) that privilege skill and drill and decontextualizing language from the worlds and practices it is about and used to enact.

**LAIC:** This issue of LAIC focuses on the relatively new concept of ‘intercultural literacy’. How would you define this in the light of your own research and conceptualizations?

**JPG:** I am not a big fan of the word “culture”—too many meanings and gets us sometimes to think at too large a scale and miss important inter-group differences. I am more a fan of Discourses in the sense of socially recognizable identities and activities—e.g., this is a tagger tagging and this is a Latino gang member writing graffiti. How do I know? How do I tell them apart? Why does it matter? What would I do and say if I wanted to enact one of these identities? What “social goods” follow on the heels of these identities and activities and what don’t? How do they relate to each other and to other Discourses around them? How are they “captured” by other Discourses across time and space so they are rendered meaningful (for better or worse) in other Discourses and in that sense non-localized? I have already indicated in an earlier response that, for me, “intercultural literacy” is all about comparing and contrasting Discourses so as to develop a meta-language and meta-thinking about Discourses in society. The everyday person becomes a “geographer” of Discourses, every ready to see his or her own Discourses within the framework of Discourses themselves in “conversation” through history (e.g., think of the conversations about “caste” in India as it circulates through all sorts of Discourses connected to all sorts of groups and institutions—this “conversation” intersects with a conversation about race, including the long-running conversation about race in the U.S., as some lower caste groups seek affiliations with the African-American struggle in the U.S.). We live in a world where there is grave danger from people who do not think pretty seriously at a meta-level about the workings of Discourses. We have come to a time in history where social stupidity (i.e., seeing your own Discourses as the world’s horizon) is endangering us all. This is massive problem—it requires a massive rethinking, for instance, of what schools are for. We have not really even begun—caught up as we are in skill-and-drill these days in our schools.

**LAIC:** What has been your own experience of moving between literacy CoPs where languages other than English are in play?

**JPG:** The issue is not for me languages other than English. All languages in the world—of course including English—are made up of many different “social languages” or “registers” (varieties for different functions used to enact different socially recognizable identities and activities). There are no monolinguals and, further, crossing register boundaries (e.g., from vernacular English to specialized varieties of academic English in school) can be as consequential as crossing language

boundaries. So for me the boundary crossing from generative linguistics to sociolinguistics and thence to education (note the progressive downward trend in “status” from the perspective of where I started) was vexed. One experience of language boundary crossing that has, over the years, given me much thought is the practice of giving talks in English to audiences who are not English speakers, something I have done a good bit. More and more it became clear to me that this was a pretty meaningless—even dangerous—thing to do. Failing to know deeply, not the indigenous language, but the ways in which the themes one is going to talk about play out in that place (always a complex matter that is sometimes vastly different from other places) is dangerous. I remember once giving a talk in Alice Springs in Australia. After the talk an Aboriginal academic and social activist took me out and just walked and talked me through the area—pointing here and there—and using some strong metaphors. Afterwards I understood that my talk was irrelevant—it was in the “wrong” language, and I don’t mean because it was in English. I have had the very same experience years ago when I worked in Deaf Education and gave talks to audiences with lots of Deaf (big “D” Deaf means “culturally” and not just physically deaf). Academics needs more silence, listening, pointing, and metaphors, especially when we hold conferences “overseas” in English.

**LAIC:** How do you see intercultural movement – be it imaginary or physical - affecting cognition, emotion and embodiment of literacy practices?

**JPG:** Learning anything new and worth learning is always first and foremost an invitation to a change in identity—where I am using the word “identity” in very much the sense of a “role” in an RPG (Role Playing Game). People need to be able to PLAY a role so that they can later take on that role “for real” as one of their “ways of being in the world”. But even this “for real” is, as people like Goffman so well argued, itself a form of role-playing. So much of school is devoted to reading manuals that have become detached from their games and to playing uninteresting roles that never really “level up” in a coherent and meaningful way. If we want depth in the roles available at school, we have to widen the playing field, in several different senses: get out of the school room and get more types of players on the field. After any real learning, a person is a different person with new uses for his or her body, emotions, words, and thoughts. In that sense, in however small a way, all learning is “intercultural”. However, I personally believe that all Discourses (activity systems, actor-actant networks, communities of practice, cultures, what have you) have very real limits and limiting features: we all need to outgrow—but not necessarily disown—our favored Discourses. Therefore, I believe that the space within which we can imagine and implement new Discourses is a crucial one for the human spirit. Look at the way Japanese culture has been embedded in anime, but then spread globally to be integrated with, in a myriad of hybrid ways, other cultural practices and logics, and in the act giving rise to new and unpredictable things all the time—new networks, new affiliations, new imaginings of the meanings of Japanese cultural themes and artifacts. Once again—for the academic deconstructors—I concede there are perils (yes, I know corporations play a role in all of this). Once again, I plead there are possibilities and let’s not be (too) afraid to intervene (but carefully with good meta-knowledge of the workings of Discourses).

**LAIC:** What do you see as the key questions which an emergent field of Intercultural Literacy Studies would need to address?

**JPG:** I think I have hit on some already. I don’t have a list, because I think we are still at the time where people will come at these issues from very different perspectives. We have never really integrated the disparate work of people who do sociocultural work on language (e.g., Wertch, Kress, Cole, Halliday, Cazden, Michaels, Collins, Street, Barton, Hamilton, Heath, Scollon, Lankshear, Hull, myself, and many many others). Sociocultural work and the New Literacy Studies is a loose integration of theories and registers, based in different disciplines, that has never gelled into an integrated theory/register (for better or worse, probably better). The NLS work has been institutionalized in Schools of Education, especially in teacher training (ironically so, since most of the “founders” worked on issues out of school)—in my view to its detriment (it takes on a very “PC” flavor, at least in the United States). So when you go to “intercultural literacy studies”, you up the ante and increase the theories and registers—not least including theories and registers from many

other countries and languages. So, ok, let's just keep going on and work it out bottom up, much as we did for the NLS. In fact, in many ways the NLS is "finished" and has to move on to an integration with new media and technologies, on the one hand, and an intercultural global world on the other (and, of course, the two are profoundly connected). Let me close by saying that something like Pokemon is a great intercultural phenomenon worked out (transformed and adapted) by kids through their "popular culture" media and their own production—let's see if we adult academics can do as well.

[End]

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